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Open letter to Minister Helgesen from concerned scientists

The world's most extensive tropical peatland complex is found in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Republic of Congo. The peat in the central Congo region stores approximately 30 billion tonnes of carbon, equivalent to three years of total global fossil fuel emissions. This recent discovery makes DRC the second most important country in the world for tropical peat carbon stocks.¹

These peatlands are only a resource in the fight against climate change when left intact. If the Congo basin peatlands were to be destroyed, the carbon that has accumulated over 10,000 years would be released as billions of tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. In the context of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and wider efforts to limit climate change, the international community should undertake efforts to support both governments in protecting these globally significant ecosystems.

The remote location of the Congo peatlands means that today they are relatively undisturbed. Nevertheless, because they have been discovered only recently, they are not protected by specific conservation plans.

¹ Dargie, Lewis et al. (2017) Age, extent and carbon storage of the central Congo Basin peatland complex. *Nature*, 542, 86-90.

Article 64 section 7 of DRC's law prohibits the felling of trees in sensitive areas including swamp areas. This theoretically could give protection, but often in DRC forest governance is lacking and the means to monitor and enforce these laws is typically absent. The fact that DRC is thought to harbour more carbon in its peat than in all the trees in its forests, but these are not included in national conservation, development, or climate plans, attests to the limited knowledge of this globally important region. In reality, DRC lacks specific peatland protections.

This is why we, as concerned scientists, are reaching out to you. We are alarmed that the opposite of ensuring peatland protection is under consideration. The Norwegian government will decide in the coming weeks whether to fund a programme proposed by the French Development Agency (AFD), one of whose objectives is to revive and expand the industrial logging sector in the forests of DRC. The proposed programme would also involve lifting the moratorium on the allocation of new logging concessions in DRC, which, due to forest governance failures, has been in place since 2002.

We are concerned that the AFD proposal has not given adequate consideration to the potential damage of the program to DRC's peatlands. Indeed, it does not mention them. Of particular concern is the hardwood peat swamp vegetation type, which, without protection and the enforcement of existing laws would be in real danger. This is why we believe the AFD programme, under the current circumstances, should be rejected.

The peatlands are highly sensitive to disturbance. Today, they remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. But, logging and altering drainage patterns easily tips tropical peatlands to releasing carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, as seen in Indonesia where logging peatlands has occurred extensively. In turn, the logging of Indonesian peatlands has led to serious forest fires with major human health, climate, and biodiversity impacts. These negative impacts have all been avoided, so far, in the Congo peatlands.

Norway is a world-leading champion of tropical forest protection and wise management. Your investment in programmes to reduce emissions from deforestation and degradation are having positive climate impacts. We ask that

Norway avoids financing projects that will have the opposite effect. We trust that, based on the evidence, Norway will make the right decision.

Yours,



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